THE SUMERIAN DELUGE MYTH
Reviewed and Revised

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The Sumerian deluge myth is inscribed on a six-colume Nippur tablet in the University Museum, of which only the lower third is preserved. It was first published by Arno Poebel in 1914, in *PBS* V no. 1, and was edited by him with exemplary detail, care, and circumspection in the same year in *PBS* IV pp. 9–70. In 1950, I published a new translation of the text in *ANET* pp. 42–4 – except for a few modifications, it was based entirely on Poebel's edition. In more recent years, two scholars have made serious attempts to retranslate and reinterpret the text. In 1969, Miguel Civil published a new transliteration and translation of the myth in Lambert and Millard's *atrahasis* pp. 138–45 (philological notes ibid. pp. 167–74). In 1981, Thorkild Jacobsen published a new transliteration, translation and interpretation of the composition which he entitled "The Eridu Genesis", in *JBL* 100/4 pp. 513–29. Both Civil and Jacobsen have made a number of significant and useful lexicographical, grammatical and interpretative suggestions. But neither of them have resolved the baffling difficulties and obscurities that abound in the text, and much of its contents still remains puzzling and enigmatic, especially the first part of the myth relating the events leading up to the divine decision to destroy mankind by sending a devastating flood on the land.[1] This paper presents a new translation and interpretation of the extant text of this "deluge myth" in the light of Civil's and Jacobsen's suggestions and my own most recent research. It is a pleasure and a profound privilege to present this study to my longtime friend and colleague, Richard Barnett, whose broad vision and informed foresight as Keeper of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities in the British Museum, inspired the hope and the promise that one day its rich tablet collection will help to restore and illuminate many Sumerian literary compositions, including perhaps this remarkable but fragmentary tale of mankind's creation, destruction, and preservation.[1a]

Briefly sketched, the contents of the myth may be very tentatively outlined as follows: Following a destroyed passage of 36 lines that may have depicted the creation of mankind by Enki with the help of the goddess Nintu and its calami-

[1] In addition to the long frustrating lacunae that darken and obscure the meaning of much of the composition, note the following partial list of crucial, critical difficulties that remain unresolved: (1) the identity of the deity speaking in lines 37–46; 85–7, 251; (2) the meaning of such key words and complexes as *ki-ùr* (line 40), *uru-me-a* and *ki-eš-me-a* (lines 41–43); (3) the rather abrupt introduction of a new creation in lines 47–49, and its relationship to what preceded; (4) the meaning of *nig-gíl* (line 46) and *nig-gíl-ma* (lines 253 and 259); (5) the meaning of *kah-dug$_4$-ga* in lines 93, 98, 202; the reading and meaning of line 99.

[1a] Cf. my "Sumerian Literature and the British Museum", *PAPS* Vol. 124 pp. 299 ff.

tous dispersion over the face of the earth.[2] the text continues with a soliloquy by Enki, in which he expresses his determination to halt the imminent extinction of "his mankind", and to return the people (presumably to Sumer) from their exile, so that they might build there the *me*-endowed cities in whose shade he could refresh his spirit (lines 37–43). To insure their well-being, he continues, he has provided the land with water, and perfected there the divine rites and noble *me* (lines 44–6). The text then continues with a rather abruptly introduced four-line passage (lines 47–50) that speaks of the creation of the "blackheads" by the four leading deities of the Sumerian pantheon (that is by An and Enlil as well as Enki and Nintu), and the proliferation of *nig-gil-(ma)* and herds of four-legged animals.

There now follows a long lacuna (lines 51–84), the contents of which are difficult to surmise – it may have depicted the happy return of mankind to Sumer, and the building of the holy cities. When the text resumes, we find an unidentified deity (probably the same Enki) soliloquizing and saying that he would inspect the labour of the people and see that the foundations are firmly laid (lines 85–7). Following a rather curt, unanticipated statement that kingship descended from heaven, the text continues with some deity (presumably Enki) assigning names to the five holy cities: Erech, Badtibira, Larak, Sippar and Šuruppak, and allotting them to their respective tutelary deities. The column ends with two rather obscure lines (99–100) that seem to concern canals and irrigation.

Now follows another long lacuna (101–39) that must have dealt largely with the events leading up to the decision of the gods to send a flood to wipe out all mankind. When the text becomes intelligible again we find some of the gods dissatisfied and unhappy over this cruel decision to which they had been bound by oath (140–4). We are next introduced to Ziusudra, described as a humble, pious reverent king constantly on the lookout for divine revelations. (145–50). Having stationed himself by a wall of some structure where presumably the gods had gathered, he heard a voice of one of the gods, no doubt the kindly Enki, informing him of the unalterable decision of the gods to destroy mankind by means of a flood (151–60).

What followed must have consisted of detailed instructions to Ziusudra to build a huge boat and thus save himself and preserve the seed of mankind. But

[2] The surmise that this missing portion of the myth may have included the depiction of a calamitous dispersal of mankind over the face of the earth, was prompted by Thorkild Jacobsen's suggestion (loc. cit. pp. 213–14) that the small fragment *UET* VI no. 61, is a duplicate inscribed with a considerably varying version of our myth. If that should turn out to be the case – and admittedly this is rather dubious – it would follow that the obverse of the Ur fragment contains a portion of the first lacuna on the Nippur tablet (lines 1–36 of the myth). Now as already noted in the Introduction to *UET* VI *sub* Nos. 61–3, the obverse of this fragment includes the first part of the "Golden Age" – "Babel of Tongue" passage in "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" (cf. my "The Babel of Tongues" in *JAOS* 88 pp. 108–11), according to which Enki confounded the speech of man because of his jealousy of Enlil. And though this is not explicitly stated in the text, it may be that he thus brought about the dispersion of mankind over the face of the earth, a calamity which he may have come to rue in the course of time – hence his determination to halt the imminent extinction of "his" mankind and to return the people from their (dispersed) habitations. Note finally that the fragmentary lines preceding the "Golden Age" passage in the Ur piece (lines 1–10) probably depict mankind's prosperity and well-being (not "his miserable way of life", cf. Jacobsen, loc. cit. p. 516) – for the restoration of the first two lines cf. note 14 of this article, and the probability that the verbal forms in lines 3–10 may be positive rather than negative (as suggested by Jacobsen).

all this is missing, since there is another long break (161–200). When the text resumes we find that the flood in all its violence had already come upon "the land", and raged there for seven days and seven nights. But then the sun-god Utu came forth, spreading his light on heaven and earth, and Ziusudra prostrated himself before him, offering numerous animal sacrifices (201–11).

Following another lacuna (212–50) the remaining extant text depicts the deification of Ziusudra. After he had prostrated himself before An and Enlil, they present him with life eternal like a god, and translate him to Dilmun, "the place where the sun rises" (251–60). The conclusion of the myth is missing and we do not know what followed Ziusudra's apotheosis.

TRANSLATION[3]

col. i

37. . . . . sets up . . . .[4]
38. I would [halt(?)] the perishing of my mankind,[5]
39. I would restore there to Nintu the . . . of my creatures,[6]
40. We would return the people from their (dispersed) habitations.[7]
41. Let them build there the *me*-endowed cities, I would refresh myself in their shade,[8]
42. Let them lay the bricks of the *me*-endowed cities in holy places,
43. Let them erect the *me*-endowed *ki-eš* in holy places,[9]
44. I have directed there the fire-quenching holy (?) water,[10]
45. I have perfected there the divine rites (and) noble *me*,
46. I have watered the earth, I would establish well-being there.[11]
47. After An, Enlil, Enki, (and) Ninhursag

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[3] In the translation I have incorporated those suggestions of Civil and Jacobsen that seemed convincing to me – these will be indicated in the notes. The line numbering follows that of Civil.

[4] It is difficult to surmise what preceded and what followed *im-gá-gá*.

[5] "Halt" is no more than a dubious surmise. "There" in this and the following lines must refer to some locality, perhaps to Sumer.

[6] This translation assumes that *nig-dím-dím-ma-mu* is an anticipatory genitive parallel to *nam-lú-lu_6-mu* in the preceding line, and that the unrestorable broken complex that followed, ended in *-bi*, like the second complex of the preceding line. The real meaning and implication of this line are quite uncertain, it may echo in some way "the creation of man" myth in which these two deities played contesting roles (cf. C. A. Benito "Enki and Ninmah").

[7] "(Dispersed) habitations" is an attempt to render the much discussed *ki-ùr* (cf. Civil's comment to this line); for *ki-ùr* as the habitation of mountain-kids and snakes, cf. Jacob Klein, *Three Šulgi Hymns* in the index *sub ki-ùr* and *muš-ki-ùr-ra* – to judge from those passages, *ki-ùr* would refer to habitations in the sparsely settled wild countryside as opposed to city dwellings. As for the rendering "we would return" (instead of "I would return"), this assumes that the verb *ga-ba-ni-ib-gur-ru-dè* is the first person plural *ga-ba-ni-ib-gur-e(n)de(n)*, and that the subject is not Enki alone, but Enki and Nintu.

[8] The rendering "*me*-endowed cities" is a surmise for the ambiguous *uru-me-a*, literally perhaps "the cities of the *me*"; the final *-bu* of *ga-ba-ab-dùb-bu* seems unjustified.

[9] The unintelligible *ki-eš* seems to be parallel to the *uru* of the preceding lines.

[10] The rendering of this line follows that suggested by Civil, but remains quite uncertain.

[11] The rendering of this line follows that of Civil.

48. Had fashioned the blackheads,[12]
49. *nig-gil* (rising) repeatedly out of the earth, multiplied[13]
50. Herds of animals, four legged, were brought into existence in the steppe as is befitting[14]

col. ii

84. Fragmentary
85. "I would. . . . .
86. I would inspect their labour[15]
87. Let . . . the builder of the land dig a solid foundation"
88. After the . . . of kingship had descended from heaven,
89. After the noble crown (and) throne of kingship had descended from heaven,
90. He perfected [the divine rites (and) the noble *me*][16]
91. [He caused] the bricks of the *me*-endowed cities [to be laid] in holy places,[17]
92. He called their names, apportioned the *kabdugga*.
93. The first of the cities, Eridu, he gave to Nudimmud, the leader,[18]
94. The second, Badtibira, he gave to the prince (and) the hierodule[19]

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[12] Following Enki's speech which presumably ended with line 46, one might have expected the text to continue with the execution of his expressed wishes, that is, the returning of the people from their *ki-úr*, and the building of the cities endowed with divine rites and *me*, where they could live in prosperity and well-being. Instead, the text introduces what seems to be a new creation, this time of "the blackheads", by the four leading deities of the pantheon. The nature and manner of this creation are not described, and it is even uncertain whether "the blackheads" refers only to the Sumerians or to mankind as a whole. Nor is it clear how the creation of "the blackheads" is related to Enki's creation of mankind mentioned in lines 38–9. Note finally that it is not altogether impossible that Enki's soliloquy ended with line 87, and not with line 46. But all this does not help to resolve the difficulties, and the interpretation of this part of the myth and its plot-structure remain uncertain and unclear.

[13] The meaning of the crucial *nig-gil* (cf. line 253 where it is followed by *-ma*, accidentally omitted in Civil's transliteration, as well as line 259 where it is also followed by *-ma*) remains uncertain. It may be of some interest to note that line 3 of the $^{g\bar{g}}$*al* hymn reads: ^{d}*en-líl numun-kalam-ma ki-ia* e_{11}*-dè* (cf. *UET* VI no. 26 and duplicates) where *numun-kalam-ma* rise out of the earth, just like the *nig-gil-(ma)* of our line.

[14] With this line cf. line 349 of the myth *EWO* (="Enki and Inanna: the Organization of the Earth and Its Cultural Processes") which reads: *máš-anše an-edin-na mu-ni-lu-lu me-te-aš bí-ib-gál* "He (Enki) multiplied herds of animals in the high steppe (and) he brought them into existence there as is befitting" Note that *UET VI No. 61* obv. 1 that begins with *máš-anše* (not *nam-lú* as suggested by Jacobsen loc. cit. p. 516, note 7) may probably be restored to read in accordance with line 50 of our text, and that obv. 2 of the Ur piece may be restored to read: *an-edin-*[*na su*$_6$ ^{na_4}*za-gin àm-lá muš-*^{na_4}*za-gin àm-kéš*] "On the high steppe [he (Enki) fastened a lapis-lazuli beard, he made it don a lapis lazuli tiara(?)]", that is, he made the high steppe bloom with greenery (cf. *EWO* line 347).

[15] The rendering of this line and the next follows in part that suggested by Civil.

[16] The restoration of this line is based on line 45.

[17] The rendering of this line is based on a restoration that reads [*uru-me-a sig*$_4$*-bi ki-kù-ga im-m*]*a-an-da-šub* (cf. line 42).

[18] The use of the locative infix *-ni-* instead of the dative infix *-na-* in the verbal form of this line and the four following lines, seems rather strange; so, too, is the omission of *-ra* following the name of the deity in this line and lines 95 and 96. If Enki is the god who named the cities and assigned them to the various deities, one would have to assume that Nudimmud is not identical with Enki in our text.

[19] This rendering follows an interesting, but not altogether convincing suggestion by Jacobsen (loc. cit. p. 518, note 7); note that the sign following *2-kam-ma* is a clear *TÚG* and therefore cannot be read *-šè* (cf. photograph).

95. The third, Larak, he gave to Pabilsag,[20]
96. The fourth, Sippar, he gave to valiant Utu,
97. The fifth, Šuruppak, he gave to Sud,
98. He called the names of these cities, apportioned the *kabdugga*
99. In the river . . . . he brought water[21]
100. He established the cleansing of the small canals the . . . .[22]

cols. iii–iv

135–139. Fragmentary
140. Then did Nintu [weep] like a . . . .[23]
141. Holy Inanna [sets up] a lament for its people
142. Enki took counsel with himself,[24]
143. An, Enlil, Enki (and) Ninhursag
144. Adjured the gods of heaven (and) earth by An (and) Enlil.[25]
145. In those days Ziusudra, the king, the *gutug*-priest . . . .[26]
146. Fashioned . . . .[27]
147. Humbly eloquent [filled with] fear,
148. Standing daily, constantly . . . .
149. Bringing forth all kinds of dreams, con[versing],
150. Adjuring the gods of heaven (and) earth he . . . .
151. . . . the gods . . .[28]
152. Ziusudra standing at its side, list[ened]:

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[20] The reading of the god's name as Pabilsag follows a suggestion by Civil; the assumption that the sign *HUR* is a scribal error seems reasonable, but is not altogether assured.

[21] The reading and rendering of this line are quite uncertain. The first two signs are certainly *ÍD* and *ÍM* (as correctly read by Jacobsen, loc. cit. p. 518); the reading *a-gi*$_4$ is incorrect (the copy is misleading, cf. photograph); the third sign is *GUN* or *DAR* (not *LA*, unless a scribal error is involved); the fourth sign is *MA* (not *BA*, as read by both Civil and Jacobsen, cf. both photograph and copy); so, too, the sign following *im-* and preceding *-al-la*, is not *BA* but *MA* (the complex therefore reads *im-ma-al-la*, a word whose meaning is uncertain and difficult to fit into the context).

[22] The three dots stand for the difficult *nig-ḫur-ḫur*.

[23] Jacobsen's rendering "Nintur wept over her creatures", which is based on the restoration of the second half of the line as *nig-dím-dím-a-*[*ni-šè i-še*$_8$*-še*$_8$] is probably erroneous; there is hardly room for the restored signs, not to mention the fact that *-dím-dím-a* would be a most unusual writing for *-dím-dím-ma*.

[24] That is, Enki was already devising a plan to save mankind.

[25] Presumably the four leading deities of the pantheon made the other gods of heaven and earth swear that they would abide by the cruel decision whether they liked it or not.

[26] The general drift of the contextual meaning and interpretation of lines 145–50, is fairly clear; they depict Ziusudra as a pious god-fearing king who consults the gods and communicates with them in various ways. But in case of lines 147–50, only the first part of each is extant, and these seem to contain only participial verbal forms – the end of the lines which may have consisted of finite verbal forms is missing. One such finite verb seems to be required at the end of line 150, but if so, its restoration is rather hopeless at present.

[27] The objects fashioned are described by the complex *AN-sag-nigin* which according to Jacobsen may be rendered as "the god of giddiness" that is, Ziusudra made statues of this deity perhaps to induce ecstatic inspiration. This is an interesting interpretation to keep in mind for future corroboration.

[28] This rather crucial line is difficult to read, translate and interpret. To judge from *da-bi* "its side", in the line following, it may have specified the place where the gods met in assembly. But the first complex is hardly *ki-úr-šè* as read by both Civil and Jacobsen (as the photograph shows, the traces of the first sign do not point to *KI*, and even the *-šè* is somewhat doubtful). Nor can the signs following *dingir-re-e-ne* be read with certainty.

153. "Stand by the wall at my left side . . .[29]
154. At the wall I would say a word to you, take [my word],
155. [Give ear] to my instruction:
156. The *me*-endowed cities(:) – the flood [will sweep over their] *kab*[*dugga*][30]
157. To destroy the seed of mankind – [thus it has been decreed],[31]
158. The verdict, the word of the assembly, [cannot be revoked][32]
159. The word commanded by An (and) Enlil [knows no overturning],
160. Their kingship – its reign [has been cut off, the heart is aggrieved].[33]
161–2. Fragmentary

col. v

201. All the windstorms (and) gales attacked together,[34]
202. At the same time, the flood swept over the *kabdugga*
203. After, for seven days (and) seven nights,
204. The flood had swept over the land
205. (And) the huge boat had been tossed about by the windstorms on the great waters,
206. Utu came forth, who illuminates heaven (and) earth,
207. Ziusudra drilled an opening in the huge boat[35]
208. Valiant Utu brought his light into the huge boat,
209. Ziusudra, the king,
210. Prostrated himself before Utu,
211. The king slaughters oxen, multiplies sheep[36]
212–17. Fragmentary

col. vi

251. "I have made you swear by heaven and earth, let it be joined with your *za*."
252. An (and) Enlil swore by heaven (and) earth, it was joined with their *za*,[37]
253. The *níg-gíl-ma*, rising out of the earth, keeps rising out of it.[38]

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[29] The speaker is probably Enki, but this is nowhere stated.

[30] The Sumerian for the line probably reads: *uru(!?)-me-a a-ma-ru ugu-kab-du*[g_4 *ga-ba*] *ba*[*-ùr-ùr-re*].

[31] The rendering "thus it has been decreed" assumes that the end of the line is to be restored to read *ĝur-gim nam ba-tar* (cf. Jacobsen, loc. cit. p. 522 for a somewhat different suggestion).

[32] For the restoration and translation of these three lines, with the help of parallels in the "Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur" cf. Jacobsen, loc. cit. p. 522.

[33] "The heart is aggrieved" attempts to render the rather difficult *šà- kúš-ù-dè*, the last complex in the line.

[34] "And gales" follows Civil's rendering.

[35] "Drilled an opening" follows Civil's and Jacobsen's rendering.

[36] The rendering of this line follows that of Civil.

[37] The translation, interpretation, and implication of these two lines are quite uncertain. To judge from the precative verbal form *ĥé-im-da-lá* in the first line, and the simple indicative verbal form *im-da-lá* in the second, the first line consists of a request by some deity, perhaps Enki, which was actually fulfilled according to the second line. I therefore render the second line as if it read: *an-*^{d}*en-líl* (*-lè*) *zi-an-na zi-ki-a i-pá-dè-eš* (instead *i-pá-dè-zé-en*) *za-ne-ne-da* (instead of *za-da-ne-ne*); note that in the first line, too, *za-zu-da* might have been expected to read *za-zu-ne-ne-da*. As for the meaning of *za* in these complexes, it is quite uncertain it seems hardly likely that it is the second person pronoun.

[38] The translation and interpretation of this line are uncertain because of the obscure *níg-gíl-ma*. So, too, is its contextual relationship to the lines immediately preceding.

254. Ziusudra, the king,
255. Prostrated himself before An (and) Enlil.
256. An (and) Enlil che[rish] Ziusudra,
257. Life like a god they give him
258. Breath eternal like a god, they bring down to him.
259. In those days, Ziusudra, the king,
260. The preserver of the name of *níg-gil-ma* (and) the seed of mankind,[39]
261. In the "land of crossing", the land Dilmun, the place where the sun rises, they caused to dwell.

[39] The full meaning of this crucial line remains uncertain because of the obscure *níg-gil-ma*.